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AUTONOMOUS GOVERNMENT FOR PORTO RICO

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A very superficial observation of the tendencies of opinion in general, not only in Porto Rico, but also in the United States, will show the unanimity with which it has been declared, in an express or implied manner, that the present status of this island cannot be maintained any longer, as it is a status which differs greatly from all precedents heretofore known and is in open conflict with the most rudimentary principles of public law. It presents us to the world as a political entity of a strange nature and vested with a purely imaginary citizenship.

We all of us agree that Porto Rico at the present time is not comprised in any of the classifications into which the public law of North America divides the territory of the United States; and, therefore, this island is neither an unorganized territory, nor an organized territory, nor a state of the Union; but it is not either, nor can it be considered as an independent state. Popular opinion is also unanimous as to our citizenship, which answers no real purpose, because if there be no state there can be no citizens.

A solution of this anomalous situation would, in our opinion, be an autonomous form of government, that is to say self-government as far as possible under the effective sovereignty of the United States: the government of the country by the country under the immediate dependency of the Capitol at Washington, and, as a necessary consequence, the political and administrative decentralization of the organizations which go to make up our territorial entity, in order that our aspirations may be freely manifested and expressed by practical acts, under the positive influence of the moderating power.

Whether such autonomy should be based on the Canadian model, under which the colony has no voice or representation whatsoever in the congresses of the mother country, or whether it should be based on the constitution which the Spanish government granted us towards the end of its régime, is a question open to discussion, but which can in no wise affect the material issue of the problem: either form contains as an indispensable element the principle of self-government, home rule, or autonomy, all of which terms have the same meaning and may be translated by the well known phrase of "Government of the people by the people."

There is no question in the mind of any person who has read the Constitution of the United States and works of writers on American public law as to whether this form of autonomous government which Porto Rico seeks is comprised within the provisions of such Constitution. The principle of self-government is embodied so clearly and manifestly in this code, the authors thereof took such special pains to bring it forward, that it is not possible to question the purpose which guided it; and therefore a form which provides self-government and administrative decentralization is perfectly constitutional.

What, however, is repugnant to the Constitution, is a centralizing and absorbing form of government. Justice John Marshall, the most learned interpreter and commentator of the Constitution of the United States, is very explicit on this point; and political men of the renown of the late Senator Hoar, concur in his opinion.

In so far as we are concerned, there is no doubt that the immediate consequence of this form of autonomous government, would be to define our unqualifiable status, converting our island into an autonomous dependency of the United States, and its inhabitants into citizens of the United States; we would emerge from our uncertain state and enjoy a condition, more or less acceptable, but at least clear and defined; we would know, finally, that we are something.

Another almost immediate result of this form of autonomous government would be to prepare us with some years of practice for subsequent solutions. While practicing this

form of government we would be able to discuss with entire frankness as to whether it would be advisable for us to aspire some time to become a state of the American Union or to become an independent state, under the protectorate of the United States. The ridiculous and stupid specter of anti-Americanism would disappear, and any person believing that such a solution were feasible for the future of his country could openly call himself a separatist.

If our interests are so closely bound to those of the continent, and our relations become closer, and an understanding between the races is engendered, which, united with the economic conditions of the country would permit it to enter a state of the Union under the same conditions as the other states, supporting the expenses and obligations which they support, the solution of annexation would be logical and admissible definitely. If, on the contrary, even though such community of interests and merger of ideas were present, our entrance as a state of the Union appeared prejudicial from an economic standpoint, then the idea of separation would arise by itself, and the mother country herself, without any premature requirements, nor laughable ostentation, would in due time present us as it presented Cuba, as a new personality in the concert of free peoples, even though she reserve and we recognize the prerogatives and advantages which her protectorate would carry with it. The latter solution which some persons fear to discuss, perhaps because they consider that it is looked on with little favor by the government of the mother country, is perhaps that which should be studied with the greatest interest in order that if the case should occur we will not be found unprepared.

With regard to the favor with which the idea of separation may be looked on by the American people, we must not forget that the most learned writers and some political men of high prestige, have already advanced it in their writings and addresses, and it is not foreign in most of those who can influence public opinion: they are not alarmed about thinking of our independence as the colonies of New England thought of theirs.

Let us consider, therefore, that the form of autonomous government for Porto Rico, with the proper separation of executive, legislative and judicial functions, and a reasonable administrative decentralization, is the only solution for the present which should be adopted immediately. To carry it into effect, the coöperation of all Porto Ricans and Americans residing here, who are really interested in the welfare of the island, is necessary.